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A lesson in metropolitanization

14 March 1978

Chester Smolski

MIAMI, Fla. — On the 21st of May Metropolitan Dade County will come of age: Twenty-one years ago, on that date, Dade began its tenure of metropolitan government, and this county containing 27 municipalities, including Miami, Miami Beach, Coral Gables and other well known urban centers, became the pioneer in large scale governmental administration.

Since that time other communities in this country, such as Nashville, Indianapolis, and the twin cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul, have adopted a similar type of government. Toronto and London are other good examples of single governments administering those extensive areas where people are concentrated, i.e., metropolitan areas.

Many Rhode Islanders, and New Englanders in general, are not familiar with county administration in this country since counties in New England generally serve no useful purpose because of our heavy reliance on city and town administration. Few Rhode Islanders are aware that there are five counties in our state (South County is not one of them!) and abolishing them, as Connecticut has done, would make no difference in providing necessary governmental services.

The United States Census Bureau recognizes this fact and in its definition of Metropolitan Areas, those approximate 275 concentrations of people centered around large cities where two out of three Americans live, uses cities and towns in its definition for New England while in the rest of the country counties are used for this classification of people concentration.

In a country of more than 3,000 counties, each with varying degrees of control, such as in police and fire protection, streets, schools, water and sewerage, and with tax assessing and collecting powers, it is worthwhile noting that their average land area is about the same as Rhode Island. In other words, while we speak of state administration, in other parts of the country they would be talking of county administration. This is one reason why it is claimed that our small city-state could operate with metropolitan government, as they do in Dade County, and end up with efficiencies of scale that would provide better governmental services at reduced costs.

Dade County, with its more than 2,000 square miles, is 50 percent larger than Rhode Island, although part of the Everglades National Park and the state controlled water conservation districts lying within the county reduce the effective area of county administration to something like the area of our state. The 1.5 million people living in the county represent a more than 50 percent larger number of persons than Rhode Island for whom services need to be provided. On these bases fairly close analogies can be made between Dade and Rhode Island.

Metropolitan Dade County is governed by a nine member Board of County Commissioners, one of whom is the mayor. A County Manager with three assistants works under the Board to administer their policy decisions. It was Boyd Arp, Special Assistant to the County Manager and county employee over the past twenty years, who supplied answers to some of my questions on metropolitanization.

Metropolitan Dade is different from the consolidated governmental structure of Jacksonville, 350 miles north of here. Jacksonville took control of all services and provides them throughout the entire 841 square mile Duval County. Arp describes the Dade model as "functional consolidation", that is to say that only selected functions or services have been brought directly under county control. These functions include environmental control, transportation, health services, recreation and parks, planning, water and sewerage, and housing. County schools were consolidated the year before Dade went metropolitan. The 27 municipalities within the county usually supply their own

police and fire protection, although they must adhere to standards set up by the county.

This two-tier structure, i.e., county and municipality, works well in those lands outside the municipalities with the 800,000 people who live in these unincorporated areas receiving all services from Metropolitan Dade. (Again, Rhode Islanders may find it difficult to conceive of land outside of municipalities because there is none in our state and all land, including state and federal lands, lies within incorporated areas.) It is within the existing 27 municipalities that there is competition between county and city for service provision.

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Arp feels this competition is good because this generally means the tier of government best able to provide a service usually gets the job to do. But the trade-off is duplication. For example, a Dade planner and a Miami planner attend all Miami Community Development neighborhood meetings and work with neighborhood groups because the county builds the community centers while the city provides the services carried on in the building itself.

Arp also claims that metropolitanization has brought efficiencies of scale that go along with administering larger areas, and that artificial boundaries of municipalities are removed when dealing with problems

that necessarily cover large areas, such as pollution control and transportation.

At the same time, with increased size come less accountability (who is responsible) and the feeling that the citizen is too removed from the political decision makers. To resolve these problems sub-governmental centers have been established throughout the county and a citizen information telephone service has been instituted.

A weakness in the home charter, according to Arp, (some would say it is a strength,) is the ease with which citizens can bring any issue to a referendum vote. Requiring only 10,000 signatures, the most publicized recent vote was Anita Bryant's gay rights issue. Currently, another referendum is scheduled on whether to go ahead with a county integrated transportation system costing nearly \$1 billion, 90 percent of which has already been funded by federal and state authorities.

The success of Metro, Arp said, is debatable. There have been some successes and problems; at the same time, he feels that some crisis would have brought Dade County to a governmental structure similar to the present system. On balance it works, and works well with county millage tax rates now less than one-half of what they were prior to metropolitanization.

The lesson for Rhode Island is that more services could be provided at the state level to give greater efficiencies of scale. The state already does this with social services, some environmental controls, uniform building codes. The land management measure, currently in the General Assembly, would bring sound planning to our limited land resources.

Progressive governmental practices evolve and change with the times, and metropolitanization is a necessary step in that direction, as is demonstrated in Dade County.

Chester E. Smolski, Director of Urban Studies, Rhode Island College, is touring several Southern cities.